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✠ Jorge Calos Patrón Wong  
*Archbishop Secretary for Seminaries*  
*Congregation for the Clergy*

**Integration in Priestly Formation within  
the Stage of Configuration**

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**Introduction**

*“Each of the dimensions of formation is aimed at ‘transforming’ or ‘assimilating’ the heart in the image of the heart of Christ....” (Ratio 89).*

This phrase that illuminates our symposium now helps us to enter into another of the fundamental characteristics of priestly formation: its **integration**. The four dimensions of priestly formation – spiritual, human, intellectual, and pastoral – are all ordered toward a common goal: the transformation of the heart of each candidate into the image of the heart of Christ. To clarify this aspect and some of its consequences, we will explore in depth the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*.

In our reflections that follow, we will only refer to **integrating the dimensions of formation** in the Configuration Stage. Our decision to select the Configuration Stage is important because this stage, as we said in our previous talk, is a specifically **priestly** stage of formation, although it of course does not exhaust *“its dynamism or its content” (Ratio 70)*.

From what was said in the previous talk, it can be affirmed that the objective of the Configuration Stage is that the seminarian freely chose to follow Christ, definitively moving toward a spiritual configuration with the Good Shepherd. They must take on Our Lord's attitudes and lifestyle, be ready to exercise priestly ministry in the Church, and live as a man of communion who is willing to give his life for his brothers and sisters in a particular Church.

Keeping this objective in mind, we will now proceed to explain carefully the direction that the *Ratio* provides for each Dimension of Formation, precisely so that, in relation to the other dimensions, each one offers seminarians the opportunities and the necessary tools so that they can achieve that goal.

## I. Spiritual Dimension

Paragraph 69 of the *Ratio* affirms that “*the stage of the theological studies or configuration, is aimed above all at the spiritual formation proper to the priest.*”

This is described as a “*progressive conformation with Christ,*” that is, a transformation and identification of the candidate with Jesus, Servant and Good Shepherd, **gradually** and **continuously**. Paragraph 68 of the *Ratio* explains how this is done:

*This configuration demands that the seminarian enter profoundly into the contemplation of the Person of Jesus Christ, the beloved Son of the Father, sent as Shepherd of the People of God. It will make the relationship with Christ more intimate and personal and, at the same time, will lead to an awareness and assumption of priestly identity.*

The primary means by which this is realized is the contemplation of the Person of Jesus Christ, therefore, a mystical experience, where the human subject is at the same time object of the divine transformation. It is about the interrelation between the divine initiative (the action of the Holy Spirit), which always has primacy, and the human response that is passive-active, since the candidate not only receives the action of God, but also welcomes him, making it his own; in other words, the human response to divine grace. This last feature is reflected upon in the previously mentioned text of the *Ratio* in the reference to entering “profoundly into contemplation,” which follows a mystical growth or deepening that includes the candidate's own personality. The seminarian's relationship with Christ should become first, “*more intimate and personal*” and second, allow him to know and accept his “*priestly identity,*” but not by external imposition, but by personal assimilation aided by a pedagogical process.

In keeping with the above, paragraph 69 of the *Ratio* describes the following effects on the candidate in his configuration with Christ:

(a) “*It causes the sentiments and attitudes of the Son of God to arise in the life of the disciple;*” the seminarian’s transformation, therefore, is not merely intimate (feelings), but also interior (attitudes).

(b) “*It introduces the seminarian to an appreciation of the life of a priest,*” and the practice of contemplation of Christ “*will lead to an awareness and an assumption of priestly identity*” (*Ratio* 68). Let us say again that it is a process where the candidate (and after ordination, the priest) plays an active role (albeit in a complex passive-active context). It is a true pedagogical process, which does not come to fruition without gradual and continuous learning. In truth, nothing nor anyone can replace the role of the candidate “*as the protagonist of his own formation*” (*Ratio* 130).

(c) “*This stage allows the gradual grounding of the seminarian in the likeness of the Good Shepherd,*” whose most characteristic features are “*knowing*” His sheep, “*seeking*” those who have gone astray, and “*laying down His life*” for them (Jn 10:17). “*Grounding*” means establishing or remaining firm in the “*pastoral charity*” of Christ. It is a gradual process (growing and continuous) that recalls the exhortation of Jesus in the Last Supper to his disciples:

*“Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love.... This is my commandment: Love one another as I have loved you. There is no greater love than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”* (Jn 15:9-14).

Paragraph 69 of the *Ratio* describes how the responsibility of the candidate (and after ordination, the priest) is carried out in their process of configuration to Christ. First of all, they are asked for a “*constant responsibility*” because “*the content of this stage is demanding and requires a great deal of commitment.*” As we said, nobody can take the place of the candidate in his formation program, except in the Configuration Stage, because it is clear that this is an assimilation and personal identification with Jesus, the Good Shepherd, through a “*practice of contemplation.*” Specifically, paragraph 69 of the *Ratio* states that this practice results in the responsible and constant application of a series of exercises, naturally not only in a merely external way, but also as an internalization of the intimate and interior conformation – appropriately of the heart – with the Lord:

(a) “*Living the cardinal and theological virtues, and the evangelical counsels.*” This is a classic formulation with which human and Christian growth is expressed, which naturally has already been sought and achieved at the level expected for the Discipleship Stage, but which continues in the Configuration Stage, under the category of the priestly vocation proper.

For example, **chastity** – a virtue that consists in the possession of one’s own life-giving power of sexuality to orient one toward the gift of oneself to others – acquires a proper priestly focus at this stage. As a Missionary Disciple, every seminarian is called

to learn “self-mastery which is a training in human freedom” (CCC, 2339). Therefore, in the Propaedeutic and Discipleship Stages, these are the courses that must be insisted upon. Now, in Configuration with Christ, Servant and Pastor, the candidate for the priesthood enters into the personal assimilation of **celibacy** for the Kingdom of Heaven that the Lord himself lived and wanted to share with some of his disciples as a particular kind of chaste life. It should not be forgotten that celibacy is a gift that must be understood, cultivated and taken care of (cf. *Ratio* 83 and 110).

(b) *“It demands docility to the action of God through the prompting of the Holy Spirit according to an authentically priestly and missionary mindset.”* It is the fundamental attitude of the Missionary Disciple who, like in the preceding point, has already been reached in the previous stage of formation, but which continues in the present under a precise priestly perspective.

For example, a particular way of relating is being imposed on the life of the seminarian: his relationship to the Bishop; his relationship to the priests, especially with his formators; his relationship with his confreres with whom he will form part of the presbyterate. Concretely, “*docility*” translates into a particular mode of obedience, proper to the pastor. This virtue is practiced in the sincere and open dialogue between the seminarian (and after ordination, the priest) with his Bishop, and likewise, in “*docility*” to fraternal correction by his peers.

(c) *“It also calls for a gradual re-reading of one’s personal history in the light of pastoral charity, which animates, forms, and motivates the life of the priest.”* It refers to a synthesis, already begun in the previous stages of formation, but now developed in a clearly priestly key, where it is oriented toward establishing in the candidate a way of life governed by pastoral charity.

For example, their pastimes or hobbies will be oriented by pastoral charity, which will move their daily existence more and more. In particular, it will adapt them as much as possible to it. If a seminarian is passionate about sports, he will seek, within his possibilities, to participate in those sports that bring him closer to the people, especially the young people he is called to serve. If he has talents in the area of technology, he will put them at the service of evangelization. Hence, the life of the faithful will be the center of attention around which their interests and concerns will revolve.

From the above analysis it is evident that these tasks are not exclusive to the Configuration Stage, but will continue in the later stages, of course without “*exhausting its dynamism or its content*” (*Ratio* 70). Following ordination in the Ongoing Stage of Formation, “*every priest should always feel that he is a disciple on a journey, constantly needing an integrated formation, understood as continuous configuration to Christ*” (*Ratio* Introduction 3). During the Initial Stage of Formation, especially during the configuration stage, “*concretely, a fruitful and harmonious*

*interaction should be achieved between human and spiritual maturity, between the life of prayer and theological understanding” (Ratio 70). Again, we find that the foundations of priestly formation correspond and need each other: formation should be **unified, integral, and gradual**.*

The Christian life of the candidate is consolidated in the experience of an authentic spirituality of the diocesan priest under the following directions (*Ratio 71*):

(a) Its proper content is **pastoral charity**, since the Christian identity of diocesan priests consists, first of all, in being “*a servant of all, so as to win over as many as possible*” (cf. 1 Cor 9: 19). There should be no restriction in their service; no one should be excluded from their pastoral care. For this reason, the priest must know and value all the charismatic gifts with which God enriches the Church, particularly the consecrated life and the new movements of Christian life, in order to promote them, to help them to live authentically in the Church, and to lead them to the common good.

(b) “*With a view to service in a particular Church...which is characterized by selfless dedication to the ecclesiastical circumscription to which they belong, or to the one in which they will in fact exercise the ministry.*” The reference to a “local Church” highlights the “incarnational” dimension of the Christian life of priests, who know how to live in history and in an ecclesial tradition that are their own, with their lights and shadows, joys and hopes, sorrows and confusions (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 1).

(c) “*It means conforming one’s own way thinking and working in communion with the Bishop and brother priests, for the good of a portion of the People of God.*”

The reference to the local Church is one of the essential elements of the diocesan nature of the secular priest, which above all must be understood as belonging to a local community and, therefore, to the relationships within it: with the Bishop, with his brother priests, and with all the faithful, including consecrated persons and lay people.

Let us dwell more on this aspect, which Pope Francis has emphasized in **the spirituality of the diocesan priest**, and which we have only mentioned very quickly in the previous talk.

- It is a life-giving and necessary experience, not an abstract declaration or a mere mechanical compliance with rules, such as attendance at meetings or other diocesan activities.

*“Diocesan” denotes an experience of belonging: you belong to a body that is the diocese.... You are a man who belongs to a body, which is the diocese, and to the spirituality of that diocesan body. (Pope Francis. Cathedral of San Pedro, Bologna, 1 October 2017).*

- It consists above all in **relationships** within the diocese: with the Bishop, with the presbyterate, with consecrated religious, and the lay faithful:

*I would like to underline the need that in order to be a good priest, there must be contact and closeness with the Bishop. The characteristic of the diocesan priest is precisely “diocesan,” and being “diocesan” finds its cornerstone in the frequent relationship with the Bishop, in dialogue and discernment with him.... In the second place, being “diocesan” involves a relationship with other priests, with all the presbyterate. There is no spirituality of the diocesan priest without these two relationships: with the Bishop and with the presbyterate. And they are both necessary. (Pope Francis. Discourse to the Community of the Pontifical Lombardo Seminary in the Clementina Chapel, 25 January 2016).*

(d) Nevertheless, the diocesan nature of the spirituality of the candidate (and of the priest) does not make him lose its **missionary dimension**: *“The gift of priesthood received in Holy Orders includes a commitment to the Universal Church and, because of that, it is open to the mission of salvation addressed to all people, even to the ends of the earth (cf. Acts 1:8).*

Consider, for example, the hundreds of secular priests in the United States who serve in other parts of the world as priests *fidei donum*. We could also ask ourselves if the missionary spirit is alive in us, to the point of being willing to serve, at least for a few years, beyond the borders of our culture and /or our comfort zone: in another diocese within the United States, as a missionary in a third-world country, or for the Universal Church.

## **II. Human Dimension**

If during initial formation *“the seminarian is called upon to develop his personality, having Christ, the perfect man, as his model and source,”* in the Configuration Stage, this goal must be “brought to its fulfillment” (cf. Philippians 1:6)

(a) After having grown during the previous stages in self-knowledge, particularly of his virtues and vices, now in the Configuration Stage the candidate, in contemplation of the Person of Christ, Servant and Shepherd, should make a spiritual and pastoral inventory of his personality from the point of view of the service and shepherding of the Lord Jesus. How will the strengths and weaknesses of the seminarian “work to the good” (cf. Romans 8:28)? How will his strengths and weakness become opportunities to configure himself to the Lord as a servant and shepherd of the flock? With a realistic view of himself, what personal challenges must the seminarian undertake so that his strengths and weaknesses do not hinder him, but rather help him in his configuration to Christ?

(b) *“The concept of **integral formation** is of greatest importance, since it is the whole person, with all that he is and all that he possess, who will be at the Lord’s service in the Christian community” (Ratio 92). The seminarian should begin the Configuration Stage as “an ‘integral subject,’ namely someone who has been previously chosen to attain a sound interior life, without divisions or contradictions” (Ratio 92). This “sound interior life without divisions or contradictions” should not be understood as absolute, but always remembering that formation is a **gradual** process. The candidate will continue to need accompaniment to continue being an “integral subject.” Precisely because of this, “every priest should always feel that he is a disciple on a journey, constantly needing an integrated formation, understood as continuous configuration to Christ” (Ratio Introduction 3).*

(c) The pastoral vision of each candidate must be sufficiently clear in the Configuration Stage: he must consider himself as a person totally consecrated to the service of others. The **integration** at this stage must be completed so that it involves **all** aspects of his life, without deliberately isolating areas of his life that are not being configured with Christ as Servant and Shepherd. Nothing is more opposed to an understanding of the life and ministry of priests. Every candidate is called upon to adjust as much as possible the traits of his personality – inclinations, skills, and preferences – to the pastoral requirements of the communities to which he is called to serve as shepherd and servant in the name and person of Christ. For example, if a seminarian has an inclination for music, he will “modulate” it to help him communicate the Gospel or worship God during Sacred Liturgy.

(d) In conjunction with what we have said above, another aspect of human formation that must be clearly outlined at this stage is growing in the virtue of **humility**, that essential virtue of every priest-servant. The humility of the priest must be to such a degree that Christ is the one acting: *“No longer I, but Christ lives in me”* (Gal 2:20). His humble service must be that of the Good Shepherd *“who did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”* (Mk 10:45; Mt 20:27-28; Lk 22:26-27; Jn 13:14). The life and mission of the priest has nothing to do with becoming a superhero or a rock star! In addition, he must have a mature awareness of his own weaknesses and shortcomings, as well as the negative effects of any of the experiences in his past – anything that could be considered as *“conflicts that remain in his personality”* – he must continue to confront (Ratio 84a). *“The experience of his own weakness can lead the priest to a greater humility and trust in the merciful action of the Lord, whose ‘strength is shown most fully in weakness’ (cf. 2 Cor 12: 9) (Ratio 84a).*

### III. Intellectual Dimension

*“Intellectual formation is part of the integral formation of the priest” (Ratio 117). “Theological formation should lead the candidate for the priesthood to a complete and unified vision of the Truth which God has revealed in Jesus Christ and of the Church’s*

*experience of faith*” (Ratio 165). Through the study of Theology, the seminarian reflects, for example, on the Mystery of the Triune God; the Mystery of the Incarnation of the Eternal Word and the Redemption He won for the salvation of the world; the Mystery of the Church as the Sacrament and Instrument of salvation. Consequently, the contemplation of the person of Christ, Servant and Shepherd – through which each candidate is configured ever more deeply to the Lord – finds in theological formation its foundation in the highest sense, not only in terms of the **content** – the Triune God is the proper “object” of theology – but also in terms of **integral participation in Divine Life**: mystically, affectively, and intellectually. This is how this dimension conforms to the transformation of his heart in the image of the heart of Christ, Servant and Shepherd:

(a) Hopefully the intellectual formation during the previous stages has given the candidate the necessary attitudes to be able to reflect upon Revelation (*intellectus fidei*) in a coherent and significant way in the current culture by using philosophical reasoning and the human sciences. It is assumed that each seminarian has already acquired a mental structure (*forma mentis*) that now will be enriched through the study of theology so that he will be ordered to the mystical, contemplative configuration with Christ, Servant and Shepherd.

(b) “Reason, when open to the mystery of God and directed to Him, allows a solid acceptance of Revelation, seeks a deeper understanding of its contents, and offers instruments and language for its proclamation to the world” (Ratio 116). The announcement of salvation with one’s own life and with one’s own words, giving “reason for one’s hope” (1 Pet 3:15), is an essential part of the priestly vocation. For this reason, the study, particularly of theology, accompanies the candidates so that when they are priests they can continue “to listen profoundly to the Word, and also to the ecclesial community, in order to learn how to read the signs of the times” (Ratio 117).

*“The organic and serious study of philosophy and theology is the most suitable means of acquiring that forma mentis that enables one to address the questions and challenges that are encountered in the exercise of the sacred ministry, and to interpret them in the light of faith” (Ratio 118).*

(c) The **study of Theology** is complemented by **pastoral practice**, which we will discuss in greater detail in the pastoral dimension. Between both formative aspects, theoretical and practical, there is a dynamic link, so that they enrich and feed each other. For this reason, all juxtaposition of both aspects should be avoided, but should rather be **integrated** into a personal and community synthesis, for example, **theology** and **ministry**, and **spirituality** and **service**.

(d) During this stage, the study of theology must be understood as a necessity for the configuration with Christ. The seminarian’s dedication to the study of theology

should be a manifestation of his desire to devote himself totally to the apostolic ministry out of love for his sheep. This must be the central motivation of his studies; it must be purified of any desire to obtain “titles” or “degrees” that might be ordered toward certain “positions” or “promotions.”

#### IV. Pastoral Dimension

The configuration with Christ, Servant and Shepherd, is the goal of this stage of formation, which includes a privileged place for the pastoral dimension of formation: pastoral experiences and the study of pastoral theology and the human sciences.

(a) Pastoral experiences should help seminarians to know the breadth of the mission of the Church. These pastoral experiences should not be optional or elective courses for only those candidates who desire them. On the contrary, all seminarians must be required to participate in a breadth of pastoral experiences. Here are some examples of the areas of pastoral activity: (1) youth and vocation ministry; (2) participation in ecclesial movements; (3) the most difficult social services (psychiatric hospital, terminally ill, prisons, extreme poverty); (4) direct knowledge of religious communities and their apostolic service; (5) civil service organizations.

(b) It is expected that in this stage the sufficient development of a series of characteristics which make up the profile of a true good shepherd in the style of Christ will be achieved:

- **Pastoral sensitivity** that, on the one hand, refers to compassion for all, especially for the poor, and, on the other hand, to the zeal for the Kingdom, in the manner of Jesus, Good Shepherd: *“This can be summed up as pastoral charity”* (Ratio, 119).
- **Disposition to service** that embodies the pastoral sensitivity in concrete attitudes, which suppose that the seminarian has acquired *“the inner freedom to live the apostolate as service”* (Ratio 119).
- **Assessment of the different vocations and ministries**, which the Holy Spirit has given to the diocesan community. Each candidate should become a true *“man of communion ... cooperating with others and encouraging ‘ministeriality.’ In a particular way, seminarians must be duly prepared to work together with permanent deacons and with the world of the laity, appreciating their particular contribution. It is also necessary for candidates for the ministerial priesthood to receive a suitable formation on the evangelical nature of consecrated life in its varied expressions, on the charism that is proper to it and on its canonical aspects, the better to ensure fruitful collaboration”* (Ratio 119).

(c) Pastoral formation, particularly pastoral practices in the broad field of the apostolate, should also help each candidate to identify and comprehend experientially the proper place of the priest in the whole of the ecclesial vocations. For this purpose,

the example of other priests “...will be a great help and incentive. This will include the elderly, the pastors who lead the Diocese, as well as emeritus Bishops. It is a matter of making the ‘pastoral tradition’ of the local Church known and appreciated, the better to ease their future entry into pastoral life, for it is there that they will be incardinated and exercise the ministry” (*Ratio* 123). Naturally, these experiences should be guided by priests, other experts, and prudent pastoral associates who assign the pastoral work to the seminarians, supervise them, and evaluate them as part of their learning process (cf. *Ratio* 124). However, it must always be kept in mind that the apostolic experiences are coordinated with the other formation activities so that the other dimensions of formation are not neglected. For example, it would be opportune to carry out apostolic activities on days without classes, and do not, at the same time, prevent the seminarians from enjoying legitimate leisure activities or spending time with their families (cf. *Ratio* 124).

(d) Pastoral formation is not only limited to apostolic activities, but it also requires the study of pastoral theology and the human sciences that are related to it, especially psychology, pedagogy, and sociology (cf. *Ratio* 122). Hopefully the human sciences have already been addressed in the previous stages. However, in theological studies one would expect to deepen them in some way, especially in their pastoral application through courses, seminars, or conferences. It is essential that we reflect critically on pastoral care in the light of Revelation and the contribution of different human and cultural perspectives, so that seminarians can learn “*the art of pastoral discernment, that is to say, able to listen deeply to real situations and capable of good judgment in making choices and decisions*” (*Ratio* 120).

### **Conclusion: Some Challenges of Integral Formation**

The exploration of the *Ratio* that we have just presented in relation to the **integration** of priestly formation, focused on the Stage of Configuration, has tried to show how at this stage “*each of the dimensions of formation is aimed at ‘transforming’ or ‘assimilating’ the heart in the image of the heart of Christ...*” (*Ratio* 89).

These reflections awaken awareness of some of the **challenges** regarding our own ongoing formation, and at the same time of our personal and communal responsibility for the formation of our brother seminarians and priests. Certainly, we could list several challenges, but let me share only three:

(a) **The personal responsibility of each seminarian and of each priest regarding their own initial or permanent formation cannot be replaced**, because each one of them is “*a necessary and irreplaceable agent in his own formation*” (*Ratio* 53). As we said, he is a “co-agent” with the Holy Spirit, which is concretized in personal initiative and being proactive in all the dimensions of formation. These basic attitudes are rooted in his heart and, for this reason, they show the configuration that is working within him in the image of the heart of Christ, who “*freely gives His life*” (cf.

Jn 10:18). When a seminarian or priest pledges to give his life to prayer, personal growth, community integration, study, and pastoral activity, he is authentically free.

(b) **The transformation of the heart of each seminarian and of each priest, in the image of the heart of Christ**, is not reduced to a purely interior sphere, even less to a subjective sphere, but it **must necessarily be manifested in their feelings, attitudes, and lifestyle**, in which it is verified that his heart is effectively assimilating to that of the same Lord, Servant and Good Shepherd. For this reason, integral formation makes each seminarian and priest, more and more deeply, a true Missionary Disciple, who is characterized by the constant attitude of “*being on the way out*” towards the social and existential peripheries which urgently require the living presence of the Lord and of His Mercy (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 20-24).

(c) **We need pastors whose personal and community life is constantly being rooted in Jesus Christ**, the Servant and Good Shepherd, so that they move their brother priests, seminarians, and the lay faithful to dare to follow their example of a continuous attitude of docility to the Holy Spirit in the Church, even against the cultural and ecclesial environment in which they live. Undoubtedly, these are the most authentic formators because they are the priests who are joyful, always learning, (*docibilitas*) and, therefore, their heart becomes more similar to the heart of the Good Shepherd.

✠ Jorge Carlos Patrón Wong  
*Archbishop Secretary for Seminaries  
 Congregation for the Clergy*

Facebook.com/obispojorgecarlos  
 Instagram:arzobispojorgecarlos  
 Twitter@arzobispojorge  
 Snpchat:arzobispo.jorge